Social Media as a Reference Service:

Focus Group

Clarissa P. Moreno

Marshall School of Business,

University of Southern California

29 June 2021

Social Media as a Reference Service Focus Group

As technology continues to advance, libraries must search for new, innovative ways to reach technology-driven audiences to "provide information and reference services to users or patrons…and venture into the creation of many innovative services" (Lamidi, Gana, and Alafiatayo, 2014, p.2). The goal of the social media as a Reference Service focus group is to address the problem libraries are facing in remaining relevant to incoming university students, that are becoming increasingly reliant on social media for information. By engaging in conversation with graduate students who come to us directly from an undergraduate program, we explore their experience with both social media and library services – in a physical and digital sphere.

Analyzing the focus group data will help academic librarians understand the students' knowledge of library services and the scope of students' use of social media. This information will assist academic librarians in determining the functionalities most requested by students and provide them with the cognizance to integrate viable reference services into social media.

Method

Procedure

One focus group was conducted which lasted 07 minutes and 55 seconds. The group moderator was a female graduate student in the Master of Management in Library and Information Science program at the University of Southern California. The focus group was conducted via the video conferencing platform Zoom.

Participants

A total of 03 participants—01 male and 2 females—took part in the study. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 31 years. The majority of participants identify as Hispanic/Latino, with one participant identifying as white. All participants are Library and Information Science (LIS) graduate students between the ages of 25 – 30, with varying levels of library reference experience; from rare use of library services to not knowing the services available through the library. Participants also had varying levels of social media use; two of the participants use social media platforms fairly regularly, while one participant noted no use of any social media, except under situations that were for news purposes.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion consisted of two main questions. The first part focused on the library services participants used at their campus. An example question was "What type of information do you usually seek out from your library?" The second part focused on the type of information participants would seek out if libraries adopted social media as a reference platform. An example question was "What type of informational videos would you seek out from this new service?" The moderator guide can be seen in Appendix A.

Findings

Data collected via the social media as a Reference Service Focus Group reflects the perceptions, opinions, and experiences the focus group participants were willing and comfortable enough to disclose during the group session.

Participant familiarity with library services

Librarian chat features. "Academic Libraries, Government Information, and the Persistent Problem of Jargon" (2019), found that many students value their independence and prefer chat features for the immediacy of response and the lower cost of face-to-face interactions. Though

reference chat services have existed in libraries since the late nineties (Matteson, Salamon, & Brewester, 2011), it is necessary for researchers to understand the extent to which current students are utilizing these services, prior to incorporating a new digital reference service. When asked about the use of library chat features, whether through the website, live chat, or email, all of the participants stated that they have never used the features though, they seem like a "great idea" and "very useful".

Library services. Exploring their use of library services further, the researcher referred to a previous question, whether participants sought assistance from librarians, in a physical library. Participants were quite reluctant to inform the moderator that they have not sought assistance from librarians unless they "*get stuck"* or "*cannot find something."*

In general, participants were aware of the reference services available online, through chat and email, though they had not made use of this. Due to the nature of these responses, the moderator probed participants further about their knowledge of references services available in a physical space. Participants expressed that they were unaware of reference desk services that were provided through the library, expressing that they would only approach the reference desk if they needed help locating physical material.

To explore their knowledge of these services, the moderator provided a few examples of services that a librarian at a reference desk assists with, such as database searches and citation help. With new knowledge of reference services librarians provide, participants expressed that had they known of these services they "could have used a lot of that help," as opposed to turning to instructors for assistance, who were not always available to assist them.

Social media. To begin to understand whether the use of social media might be an appropriate medium for reference service, the moderator needed to gain insight to their experience with

social media, and the extent to which they use it. The experience with social media varied from no personal use, but frequent use for work to "pretty familiar" with social media for personal use.

In an effort to gain an understanding of the participant's use of social media, the researchers asked participants to expand on their use of social media. "What type of information do you seek when using social media?" The results were wide-ranging and dependent upon the social media platform they were using. For instance:

Instagram: All of the participants stated that this platform is the preferred choice for both personal and professional use. However, participants explained their use of this platform is "a distraction."

Twitter: 66% percent of participants stated that their use of Twitter was as a news source. Participants declared they look to Twitter to search for "really quick updates if there is something happening," i.e., a state emergency, or for pandemic updates.

Reddit: All of the participants affirmed their use of Reddit as a platform for research. Reddit is the number one source for participants to do research outside of the library databases or search engines such as Google; particularly when attempting to locate specific information for hobbies and school.

Libraries and social media. The knowledge that the participants do use social media for research, was cause for the moderator to examine whether they would look to a library's social media page for research or assistance, and what type of information they would seek out through their platforms. Participants communicated that they would use a library's social media platform to locate tutorial videos on general information such as citations, locating databases, and overall general tips. However, prior to using their platforms for tutorial searches, participants noted that

there would be a need for the library to build a community with "entertainment" that eventually leads to engaging with their users for academic engagement.

Discussion

Though the focus group was fairly small in size, the similarities in their answers suggest a need to incorporate reference services to social media platforms, to provide more accessibility to students who are unable to physically come into the library and remedy the lack of guidance from instructors. When asked about their familiarity or use of existing library services, participants seemed ambivalent with providing much information – it is likely that due to their enrollment status of a library and information sciences program, they were hesitant to admit their lack of real-world experience with the services.

Implications of popularized current trends on social media are necessary to build a community with a technologically literate academic student body. Libraries must be willing to facilitate growth by actively using their platforms in a way that is both entertaining and engaging, without saturating the platform feed with basic library information.

Participants of the social media and Reference Service Platform are graduate students currently enrolled in a library and information science program, it is reasonable to say that the participants felt unsure about providing the moderator with adequate information about their library experiences due to their enrollment status. The age of the participants is slightly older than the average age of a student enrolling in college (18-24) for the first time. This puts the focus group at a bit of a disadvantage, as the newly enrolled undergraduates are likely to have more experience with social media as a knowledge-sharing database.

Should this focus group be repeated in the future, researchers would look to identify undergraduate students, who are not enrolled in any type of library program offered at that level

– such as a library technology certificate - to avoid any ambivalence from the participants. The use of searching for undergraduate students would also assist the researcher in identifying students who have more experience with or use social media with more regularity as a database.

References

Kirk, J., Sundt, A., & Eastman, T. (2019). *Academic libraries, government information, and the persistent problem of jargon.* ACRL. https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2019/AcademicLibrariesGovernment%20InformationPersistentProblemJargon.pdf

Lamidi, D.A., Gana, M., & Alafiatayo, B.O. (2014). *Use of social media in information Dissemination.* Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319230692_ _of_Social_Media_in_Information_Dissemination

Matteson, M., Salamon, J., & Brewster, L. (2011). A systematic review of research on live chat service. *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 51*(2), 172-189. https://doi.org/10.5860/rusq.51n2n.172

Naylor, S., Stoffel, B., & Van Der Laan, S. (2008). Why isn't our chat reference used more? Finding of focus group discussions with undergraduate students. *References & User Services Quarterly*, *47*(4), 342-354.

Appendix A

Moderator Guide:

The problem libraries are facing today is trying to remain relevant to younger generations with the influx of information becoming readily available online through knowledge sharing platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram. Naylor, Stoffel & Van Der Laan, reference Joseph Janes, in stating that "libraries will need to provide a mix of services...each suitable for different kinds of questions and information needs" (2008). The goal of this focus group is to understand how we can supplement existing reference services with social media, to remain relevant to younger generations utilizing social media for their information. Participants of this focus group will be undergraduate and graduate students, currently enrolled in the university. Reimbursement will be provided in the form of a gift card to the student store, upon completion of the focus group. The library budget will determine the amount on gift cards, between the dollar amount of $5 - $10.

I. Introduction/Warm up

II. General social media use:

   A. What platforms do you use? Which do you prefer, why?

   B. How much time do you spend on social media?

   C. [PROBE] What information do you search for on social media?

III. Library use:

   A. How often do you go to the library for assistance from a librarian?

   B. How often do you seek assistance from librarians using online chat/email/etc.?

C. When visiting your library's social media page, what type of information do you look for?

D. [PROBE] What type of information do you usually seek out from your library?

IV. Likes and dislikes

A. What do you like about libraries on social media?

B. What do you dislike about libraries on social media?

V. Libraries on social media

A. What would you like to see libraries use their social media for?

B. What are the most important things you can think of for librarians to keep in mind for providing reference services through social media?

C. [PROBE] Providing reference services over social media would supplement the services already provided, for general information. What type of informational videos would you seek out from this new service?